WASHTENAW IMPRESSIONS

Published occasionally by the Washtenaw Historical Society,
Ann Arbor, Michigan.
Dr. C. Howard Ross, President

Mrs. I. William Groomes, Secy.-Treas.
1209 S. State Street
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Lela Duff, Editor

Vol. 13, No. 5 February, 1958

# ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN DRAMA

by Bruce L. Nary
Instructor in the Speech Department, University of Michigan.
Read at the February meeting of the Society.

A recent issue of The Saturday Review of Literature said except for Jesus Christ and Napoleon no other man has been so much written about as Abraham Lincoln. The volume of Lincoln literature is all the more astonishing because its subject stood in the spotlight of history only the four last years of his life.

How much of this Lincolniana is presented in the form of plays? Perhaps three popular 20th century Lincoln plays will come to mind almost at once: John Drinkwater's Abraham Lincoln, E. P. Conkle's Prologue to Glory, and Robert Sherwood's Abe Lincoln in Illinois.

I propose to make a chronological survey of the published plays in which Abraham Lincoln appears, as well as to indicate the various ways in which the different playwrights used the same basic material, Lincoln's life, and presented it not only from numerous points of view, but also in such varied styles as to illustrate the total range of dramaturgy.

Boyd A. Wise, Head of the Department of English, Lincoln Memorial University, points out that Lincoln is an ideal American dramatic subject, and that every lustrum of Lincoln's life has now been dramatically represented.

"Great drama demands a great crisis in order that the human material may be wrought to heroic endurance. The events antecedent to the greatest crisis of our history are those in which Lincoln played a great part, and in the crisis itself he played the major role.

"He is the supreme figure for American tragedy because of the march of events and especially because of his timely end, timely for tragic presentation---tragic death at the height of a career---glory. Had Admiral Dewey been killed in action at Manila he might have been the subject of a play. Grant,

too, lived beyond the dramatic moment for demise. In this point of timeliness Lincoln is even a better subject than Lee."

One of the first Lincoln plays was published in 1862 in Madison, Wisconsin, by S. D. Carpenter, editor of the Wisconsin Patriot. Carpenter entitled his Lincoln drama, The Irrepressible Conflict, and published it in three installments on the last three evenings of December, 1862, as a special New Year's message to the subscribers of his newspaper.

The title and lengthy subtitle are characteristic of 19th century drama: The Irrepressible Conflict, Beginning of the End, or, The Rise, Progress and Decline of 'One Idea,' Including the Principal Acts in the Life of Abraham The First, In Eleven Acts.

The Irrepressible Conflict is not an unusually long play despite its eleven acts, because these act divisions are comparable to present day scene divisions. The prologue and epilogue are written in the form of Italian sonnets, and the remainder of the play, for the most part, is in blank verse. Many of the speeches are to be delivered as asides. The dialogue has numerous allusions to classical and mythological characters. For example, McClellan is referred to as Ajax, and Jefferson Davis as Hector.

The major conflict in The Irrepressible Conflict is between Lincoln in his desire to enact an Emancipation proclamation and the various political groups which tey to influence Lincoln. In the beginning of Act X, Lincoln calls a cabinet meeting and begins by saying

Alas, my Lords,
What an unkind hour is this to me!
For scarcely from delirious slumber did I wake,
On this bright, yet ill-boding morn,
E'er a courier, drunk with dread affright,
Did call me from my couch, to pour
Into my unwilling ears, results, astounding,
Of the Proclamation in Kentucky, where
As his story runs, the exasperated masses
Do join the rebels by scores and grand divisions.

This speech with its artificial diction, for who can imagine Lincoln's saying, "Alas, my Lords," continues for sixty-six lines. Lincoln then speaks an aside of four lines and faints. The heroic Lincoln had to endure much suffering, but Carpenter is the only playwright who permitted Lincoln to succumb to it even for a moment by fainting. The play ends on a pathetic scene with Lincoln's speaking lines which are highly exaggerated in their gruesome imagery.

My rabid Lords,
It grieves me sore to see this cruel sport
Strewing blood and hair about my virtuous court.

The moral of the play is boldly labeled as such in the epilogue.

Sad is the moral...brother shouldn't war with brother,
Nor in the Cabinet sho'd they maul each other.
May God in future forbid such exhibitions,
And rid the country of such vile politicians,
Lest they our rights and liberties destroy.

Carpenter's moral has withstood the test of time much better than his poetry.

The popularity of Lincoln as a subject for biographical drama is indicated by the wide diversity of plays in the following list:

The Royal Ape: A Dramatic Poem in Four Acts, By William Russell Smith, Richmond, Virginia, 1863. (A four-act satire which is bitterly anti-Lincoln.)

The Administrative Telegraph, or How It Is Done. (A three-act play published in the Metropolitan Record, New York, 1863.)

Lincoln's Anfang, Gluck und Ende, a drama in 12 acts by Edward Renlom, Coburg, Germany, 1865.

The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln, in five acts, by an American Artist in Glasgow, Scotland, 1876.

Thus, it is seen that as early as 1863 Lincoln was interpreted as a disreputable character by southern playwrights. But by 1865 Lincoln had gained such international fame that a German playwright used him for the subject of a drama. It was an American, Hiram D. Torrie, who published The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln in Scotland in 1876, but this is also indicative of the widespread popularity of Lincoln in drama shortly after his assassination.

Torrie's The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln follows the 19th century traditional five-act structure, divided into many scenes. Torrie uses twenty-one scenes to dramatize historical events beginning with Abraham Lincoln as a young farm boy famous for his rail splitting ability and ending with the capture of John Wilkes Booth.

In his introduction to The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln, Torrie explained that he attempted to portray selections "from the startling events, crowding such a stride from comparative obscurity to undying fame and violent death; plot and poetry have been kept mostly subordinate to facts, though some license has been taken with names, dates, etc."

Primarily to cut down the extensive number of people who would be required in the cast, "the characters of some who might otherwise be entitled to appear, have been blended in those of others made to figure throughout the piece." Several individuals, based on actual biographical data, are united into the character of John Hanks.

The awkwardness of the poetry and the faulty diction, which are in part a direct result of Torrie's attempt to flood his

audience with facts, can easily be illustrated in one of Lincoln's speeches concerning Mary Todd.

> Her father in a mansion lived, whilst I
> Slept in a cabin on the forest edge:
> One day, whilst plunging in the rapids near,
> A boat against a rock gave one wild dash
> And went from 'neath that struggling girl and one
> Who proved her brother , when her life was saved
> Him, as by chance, the rushing torrent caught
> And hurl'd all pow'rless, far beyond her reach
> Twice sank she in the boiling waves from sight,
> Ere I was forced to use this brawny hand,
> And catch her by that wavy wealth of hair!
> I saved her, and I know not if 'twas love---
> But when I thought of her estate, and mine,
> And hied away, to clear the gaping group,
> I felt that in exchange for that dear load
> I'd got at heart a burthen heavier far,---
> Which has not lighter grown, in six long years.

Evidently Torrie felt free to use dramatic license in creating a mythical episode about Lincoln's having saved Mary Todd from drowning.

As early as 1876, playwrights who used Lincoln's biographical data were faced with an ever increasing problem of selecting details, because by this time all kinds of stories and anecdotes concerning Lincoln were well known. Evidently Torrie wanted to show that Lincoln was a post master who carried the mail in his stove pipe hat. Torrie changes the locale from the drawing room of Judge Mayberry's house to a "Bend in Sangamon River---Flat Boat partly built--Lincoln and Hanks at work in the foreground." Torrie knew very little about the problems involved in staging a play and particularly in shifting the realistic scenery which he suggests. The action in The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln moves so rapidly from one setting to another that a series of elevator-revolving stages would be obligatory.

Torrie attempted to present frontier local color in such scenes as the wedding reception, where the Calithumpian fiddle is described in detail in the script, and the stage manager is asked to stage a complete "western country dance."

Spectacle is one of Torrie's fortes. For example, in the scene which takes place in Springfield the night before Lincoln leaves for Washington, D. C., a crowd, plus a brass band and torchbearers, gather outside Lincoln's house. Lincoln finally appears at the upper window of the house and speaks to the crowd milling below him in ringing blank verse.

This scene is followed by one which "out herods Herod" in its dramaturgy. The setting is the railroad station in Baltimore in which two men lurk in the shadows waiting to assassinate Lincoln. As the train arrives, "Cars are seen, and among the crowd, porters moving trunks, boys selling papers, as also the assassins ..." Lincoln is disguised in a "grey Scotch plaid" shawl and has

a cap pulled well down over his face. He walks in an extremely stooped position, and thus he is not recognized by the assassins. A tall man, "looking very much like Lincoln," wearing a stove-pipe hat, is shot, whereas Lincoln escapes uninjured. A riot occurs, and a horseshoe is found in the middle of the group which convicts the murderer.

For the actual assassination Torrie uses an alley near Ford's Theatre in Washington as the setting. "Scene opens---showing through private box in Ford's theatre where part of the American Cousin is being played..." The stage directions suggest the level of excitement needed in the staging.

> (Booth, with revolver concealed, is seen looking on, and hisses through his teeth:--- "Yes, you old gorilla, laugh! Your time has come!"---The play proceeds, as Booth is seen to fire; dropping the pistol and shouting. He jumps over upon the stage falling and wounding himself by catching his foot in a flag hung over the box front. Mr. Lincoln falling back is surrounded by Mrs. L. and companions, who scream in anguish and consternation, and the cry prevails that the President is shot. Surgeons are called, and officers with others gather.)

Torrie concludes his Lincoln drama with an extravaganza! The setting is a barn surrounded with officers, soldiers and other men. Booth shouts to them from within the old barn and fires a couple of shots at the crowd. After all attempts to get Booth to surrender have failed, an officer throws a burning match against the barn. Torrie does not suggest how this can be staged. Only after fire and smoke rage from the barn "the wretched smoke-begrimed, half-starved looking man comes out with a revolver in one hand and a long knife in the other..." Booth falls mortally wounded, shouting, "I killed the giant of them all!"

---

In 1879, J. W. Rogers, a lawyer in Washington, D.C., published Madame Surratt, A Drama in Five Acts. The only preface to the play is a brief paragraph signed by the author and printed on the title page.

> Harmony being now restored and the Union preserved, I have endeavored to present the terrific scenes which our great Rebellion closed; and beg leave to suggest that the harsh expressions, put here into the mouths of both Confederate and Federal actors, find no place in my heart, nor in the hearts, I trust, of any of my countrymen in either section of the Union; but in writing a drama of the times I found it necessary to make the representatives of either party speak as they formerly felt. If my work should live, it will stand as a beacon over a bloody sea, to warn our children, when we who fought upon it shall have passed away.

The second act shows Lincoln for the first time. He is President, and the scene is in the President's Mansion. Lincoln's first speech is a soliloquy which gives exposition as well as Lincoln's point of view.

> Yet could we make an honorable peace
> The South should have protection, and return
> To join us in a great regenerated country.
> Freedom to all inscribed upon our banner,
> 'Malice to none; but charity for all!'

The characters in Madame Surratt talk about President Lincoln a great deal. For example, Madame Surratt is telling Lilly Beall about a previous meeting with President Lincoln in which she was requesting a pardon.

> At first, when I would justify the boy,
> And tried some learned precedent of law,
> His excellence put on a solemn air,
> And told an anecdote, in ridicule.
> At this I took another turn, and asked him thus:
> Do you remember, Mr. President, your mother?
> 'Yes,' he said, 'and when I used to go to mill,
> Or plowed among the daisies in the field,
> I never saw a pretty flower but what
> I thought of her; and when I came from school or work
> She always met me with her blessing, saying:
> "Ab'ram, you'll one day be President."

The scene ends with "tears rushing down his rugged face" and Mme. Surratt walking off with the pardon. The sentimentality of this scene carries over into the next one in which Lincoln, in a soliloquy, says that he would rather split rails in Illinois for fifty cents a day than run this government. When he practiced law, the judge and jury always took part, but here, as President, he feels that the Cabinet and counsellors are nothing and he stands alone.

Playwright Rogers has President Lincoln grant an informal meeting with Booth even though there is no historical truth in this action. Booth pleads with Lincoln to pardon Beall. Throughout the scene Booth clutches the dagger which he has concealed under his coat. Lincoln is not convinced that he should pardon a guilty man. Lincoln interrupts Booth with a humorous anecdote.

In the second scene of the fifth act, Lincoln is considering not going to the theatre because it is Good Friday. Once more Booth comes to the President's study. Again Booth has a concealed weapon with him, but he fails to use it. Booth extends a personal invitation to Lincoln to attend the performance in the theatre that night. After Booth exits, Lincoln says that he will be there, in spite of a warning that had come to him in a dream.

Rogers does not dramatize the assassination. Lincoln's ghost appears after Booth is mortally wounded. Lincoln's final words to Booth are

> The South is conquered, and the Union saved---
> A mad but generous valor led them on,
> And there was greatness in their fiery zeal.
> Put out these flames, and let us all forgive!
> My motto from the first hath been:
> Malice to none, but Charity for all!

---

In 1880, William A. Luby published in Kalamazoo, Michigan, J. Wilkes Booth; or The National Tragedy. In a preface, Luby writes that this play is founded on the assassination of President Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States; the assault upon Secretary Seward, his son and attendants; the origin and progress of the plot; the capture of Seward's assassin, and the tragical end of him who deprived the Nation of her greatest and most honored chief, Abraham Lincoln.

J. Wilkes Booth; or The National Tragedy is written in five acts, but it is not in verse as were the other Lincoln plays written during this period. There are nine conspirators, headed by Booth. Dr. Mudd, the physician who set Booth's leg, is one of these conspirators who meet at Madame Surratt"s house in Washington as well as in Canada.

Lincoln does not appear in this play until Act IV, Scene 1. President and Mrs. Lincoln are in the White House, and Mrs. Lincoln asks her husband if he thinks the war will ever end. Mrs. Lincoln says that she almost wishes the South had won its cause from the beginning without bloodshed. To this Lincoln replies:

> My dear wife, let such a thought not mature in a brain so clear as yours. Those who have fallen with the stars and stripes before them lie in the most holy graves that God can give. They are shrouded with a mantle of glory that will never fade away; and although their names are known but on the regimental rolls from which they fell, yet they are more honored, more famous, and will live longer in the memory of mankind than those whose names are wrought in letters of gold upon the indurated throne of power.

Notice the similarity between this speech and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

---

In the 1880's other plays in which Lincoln was one of the principal characters began to be published quite rapidly.

> C. Osborne Ward, The Great Rebellion, Reminiscent of the Struggle that Cost a Million Lives, A Drama in 5 acts, New York, 1881.
>
> S. Whitaker Grove, The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln, Or the Rise and Fall of the Confederate States, in five acts, 1881.

J. W. Bryant, Abraham Lincoln, Historical Tragedy in Five Acts, New York 1886.

Benjamin Chapin, Lincoln at the White House, A Drama of War Times, in Four Acts, 1900.

A. Donald Upton, Abraham Lincoln, God's Gift to the Ages, The American Missionary Association, 1909.

Martin Bunge, Abraham Lincoln, A Historical Drama in Four Acts, 1911 (Ann Rutledge romance is dramatized.)

In 1919 English playwright John Drinkwater published Abraham Lincoln. Concerning this famous play, drama critics generally agree on the forceful characterization of Lincoln, and the effectiveness of the whole structure of the play. Drinkwater's Abraham Lincoln begins with Lincoln's notification of his nomination by the Republican convention in 1860 and ends with Stanton's neat summation: "Now he belongs to the ages!"

---

In 1918 William Langdon published The Masque of the Titans of Freedom. This is one of the first patriotic masques in which such characters as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are presented.

---

Thomas Dixon published A Man of the People in 1920. One critic suggests that A Man of the People is a very dynamic play in which there is an excellent use of facts and dramatic artistry. ---Notably, the spirit of Nancy Hanks, whose death forms the Prologue of the play, is his recurrent guardian until the final scene in 1864. The dramatic juxtapositions in this play are striking, the plot is close-knit, the transitions smooth, the suspense maintained in crescendo to a tense climax. Of all the Lincoln plays, A Man of the People is one of the best to reveal Lincoln as President. It shows best his great heart and his great mind, best shows the sinister forces against him and the master strategist who still stood firm, best shows the narrow margin of his success, and tests the enduring fibre of the man.

---

Al and Ray Rockett wrote one of the first motion picture scenarios in which Lincoln appeared as one of the characters. This motion picture was titled simply Lincoln and was released in 1924.

---

One of the first one-act plays about Lincoln was published by Elma E. Levinger in 1925. It was A Child of the Frontier, and it helped establish a pattern for a whole series of one-act plays about Lincoln.

---

E. P. Conkle copyrighted Prologue to Glory first in 1936 and then again in 1938 in conjunction with the Federal Theatre. Concerning this play, Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre, said; "Conkle's play about the youth of Abraham Lincoln . . . . emerges as one great moving record of a young man unconscious of the events already casting their shadow upon him."

Prologue to Glory was first produced on March 15, 1938, at Maxine Elliott's Theatre, New York. The cast is very large: there are over 60 different speaking roles plus the people of New Salem who constitute the crowd scenes. The author indicates that "this play makes no attempt to be true in all its historical details; it attempts, rather, to be true to the spirit of the times and the leading character."

Some scholars are critical of Conkle's level of language in the beginning scenes. One critic says, "Its bungling, over-done representation of dialect should not be applied to Abe. Any man who at twenty-one and upwards, despite the good work of Indiana teachers, used the language put into the mouth of Abe would never have reached a position higher than the top rail of one of his own fences.... Dialect corrected, many of the sentences would contain what Abe is known to have said."

For example, in the first scene Storekeeper Offut asks Abe to join him, and Sarah Lincoln asks Abe if he is going to go. Abe replies, "Seems t' me I air perty well sityated right yur, Ma." Later in the same scene he says, "Person ort t' do a leetle thinkin' 'bout a thing like this, Ma. Better eat beans and bacon in comfort an' peace than cakes and ale in fear an' tremblin'."

Much later in the play, after the death of Ann Rutledge, Conkle presents a scene in which Lincoln is talking about the death of his mother. Here Conkle avoids the dialect and provides Lincoln with lines that are noteworthy for their poetic simplicity.

> I went through something like this once before!
> Someone you love---standing helpless---waiting---
> I sat day by day reading ma parts of the Bible she liked best. On the sixth day she called me to her bed---talked of many strange things---principalities, and powers and things present and things to come---urged me and Sairy always to walk in paths of Goodness and truth---told us many things would come t' him that served God---an' th' best way t' serve Him was to serve His people... She was amongst the lowliest of mankind. She walked the earth with her poor feet in the dust---her head in the stars---. Pa took me down into the woods t' make her a coffin. Pa was sawin' and I was hammerin' the pegs in. The hammer dropped at my feet; it was like someone was drivin' em into my heart."

---

Abe Lincoln in Illinois, by Robert E. Sherwood, was presented by the Playwrights Company at the National Theatre, Washington, D. C., on October 3, 1938. This play is divided into three acts:

in and about New Salem, Illinois, in the 1830's; in and about Springfield, Illinois, in the 1840's; and in Springfield, 1858-61. It begins with Lincoln under the tutorship of Mentor Graham and concludes as Lincoln as President-elect bids farewell to his fellow-townsmen. Memorable episodes include Lincoln's courtship of Ann Rutledge, her death, his resultant mental aberration, his candidacy for the State Legislature, Mary Todd's courtship of Lincoln, his breaking the engagement, his becoming re-engaged to her, his prayer for Seth Gale's boy, his choice for the nomination for the Presidency, his debate with Douglas, the receipt of the election returns, and Lincoln's farewell to Springfield.

Edmond M. Gagey in Revolution in American Drama says that Abe Lincoln in Illinois gives us a brilliant analysis of a maladjusted, unhappy man forced into unwilling action, partly by the persistent single-mindedness of Mary Todd, partly by his acute awareness of the social and moral ills of the time. A brilliant scene shows Lincoln on the night of the 1860 election desperately hoping that he will not win, fully conscious of what victory will mean. The play's effectiveness comes partly from this realistic characterization but mainly from pointed applications to similar present-day problems.

Abe Lincoln in Illinois is an excellent climax to a whole series of biographical plays produced in the first part of the 20th century. The Sherwood play still remains outstanding in that it shows very clearly that the historical and biographical dramas have abandoned for the most part the blood- and-thunder histrionics which were so popular in the early Lincoln plays. Also the whole treatment of the material has become less romantic, more scholarly and realistic. Quite frequently the present day playwrights use the past with specific applications to current problems.

The plays which were written while Lincoln was alive used him as the center of a number of political controversies. Many were bitterly opposed to his ideas, and they presented Lincoln as a villain. With the assassination of Lincoln, however, he became a national and international hero, and thus almost a deity in drama.

For the most part, the plays written about Lincoln in the latter part of the 19th century were heroic dramas in blank verse, and the five acts were divided into numerous scenes. Most of these early Lincoln plays suffer from the playwrights' attempts at imitating Shakespearean verse, forcing their material into the heroic style, as well as over-loading their plots with too many characters and excessive settings.

There were comparatively few Lincoln dramas written shortly after the turn of the century. As the 20th century progresses, however, Lincoln as a subject for drama continues to become more popular. With the revival in interest in historical dramas in general about 1930, all types of Lincoln dramas began to appear.

Since 1945 outdoor historical drama has come into vogue primarily through the plays of Paul Green and Kermit Hunter. Hunter's most recent outdoor drama, Forever This Land, recounts Lincoln's days at New Salem, Illinois.

Thus, as the interest in Lincoln as a central figure in drama continues, playwrights present various phases of Lincoln's life in the form of one and three-act plays, outdoor dramas; radio, television, and motion picture productions. If recent experiments are indicative of the future, the new entertainment media will provide additional means of representing the life of Abraham Lincoln.

---

Homer Koch, in a tribute to Lincoln delivered in the House of Representatives in Washington on February 12, 1923, said:

> There is no new thing to be said about Lincoln. There is no new thing to be said of the mountains, or of the sea, or of the stars. The years go their way, but the same old mountains lift their granite shoulders above drifting clouds; the same mysterious sea beats upon the shore; the same silent stars keep holy vigil above a tired world. But to the mountains and sea and stars men turn forever in unwearied homage. And thus with Lincoln. For he was a mountain in grandeur of soul, he was a sea in deep undervoice of mystic loneliness, he was a star in steadfast purity of purpose and service. And he abides.